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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 000204

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: NEW IDPS ARRIVE IN JAFFNA; HUMAN
RIGHTS VIOLATIONS DOWN, MILITARY CONTROL REMAINS TIGHT

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Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr. for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (SBU) Summary: On a February 10-11 trip to Jaffna, DCM and RSO discussed conditions for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the human rights situation on the peninsula with government, military, and civil society representatives and the UN. They also participated in the launch of a program, partly funded by USAID, to improve emergency medical response capabilities in Jaffna. Jaffna hosts nearly 2,000 of the 35,000 IDPs who fled fighting in recent months in four temporary camps. Prices are high and economic opportunities are extremely limited on the peninsula because the movement of goods is only possible by sea or air. Human rights violations are down from the alarming levels of 2006 and 12007. The Bishop of Jaffna characterized the peninsula as an "open prison." Post will continue to press the government for early resettlement of the IDPs and the restoration of greater freedom of movement. End Summary.

Nearly 2000 "New" IDPs in Jaffna

12. (U) As of February 10, there were 1,957 "new" IDPs in Jaffna, a relatively small number compared to the 35,000 IDPs who, according to the government, have left the Vanni in recent weeks, with tens of thousands more expected. Most of the new Jaffna IDPs are from Nagarkovil, a narrow strip of land along the eastern side of the Jaffna Peninsula that was controlled by the LTTE until January 2, 2009. In addition, about 200 of the new IDPs in Jaffna were picked up from boats in November and December as they tried to escape the fighting. Ita Schuette, who heads the UNHCR's operation in Jaffna, explained that IDPs received by the Army's 55th Division are brought to Jaffna, while those under the 58th Division are taken to Vavuniya. The nearly 2000 new Jaffna IDPs are placed in four transit sites: Mirusuvil (1325), Kopay Teachers Training College (438), Kodigamam Government School (125), and the Jaffna Thirnagar Welfare Center (69). UNHCR expects another 1000-2000 IDPs to arrive at these sites, and hopes that at least one more facility will be opened to accommodate them.

Another 100,000 "Old" IDPs on the Peninsula

¶3. (U) The new IDPs join approximately 100,000 "old" IDPs in Jaffna; 80,000 were displaced before 2006 and 20,000 were displaced in 2006-07 after fighting between government forces and the LTTE resumed. 10,000 of the "old" IDPs are scattered among 69 welfare centers, while the rest live in host communities or with family members or friends. According to Schuette, the primary reason most of these 100,000 IDPs cannot go home is that their land is located in government-designated High Security Zones (HSZs). Unlike the newly displaced, the 100,000 older IDPs have relative freedom of movement on the peninsula.

School Children Confined to Transit Sites

¶4. (SBU) The new transit sites are managed by the Government Agent in cooperation with the Army. The UN and ICRC have access to the new sites. (Note: The transit sites, or camps, are distinct from the larger "welfare villages" the government is building in Vavuniya and Mannar.) According to Schuette, shelter, water, health care, and sanitation in the sites are adequate. Doctors, public health officials, and midwives visit on a regular basis, and emergency cases are taken to the hospital. However, she characterized conditions at Mirusuvil, which was opened in January and is the largest of the sites, as unacceptable, due mainly to overcrowding. Another major concern is that with the exception of the

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Kopay, where children attend a nearby school, children in the sites are not allowed to leave to attend local schools. The Army claims this is for security reasons. The UN emphasizes the importance of children leaving the confines of the sites to attend school with non-displaced students.

Resettlement Could Be Slow in Coming

¶5. (SBU) DCM stressed to Jaffna's Security Forces Commander Major General Samarasinghe and Government Agent K. Ganesh that the residents of the new transit sites should be released and permitted to resettle as quickly as possible. (Note: Samarasinghe, Ganesh, and representatives from the UNHCR and ICRC meet weekly to review issues related to IDPs, a forum which Schuette described as very useful.) General Samarasinghe said it would be 6 weeks or months before security checks by the police and military intelligence to determine which of the residents have been associated with the LTTE are completed. He noted that the February 9 incident of a suicide bomber killing herself and 29 others at a screening center in Mullaitivu District illustrates the need to conduct thorough background checks on the IDPs. Ganesh acknowledged that of the nearly 2,000 new IDPs, only one has been taken into police custody, and he was not charged. Ganesh predicted that releases in Jaffna could be delayed by the large numbers of IDPs from the Vanni who need to be screened, arguing that Vanni IDPs would resent it if their counterparts in Jaffna were released ahead of them. (Note: On February 13, the GSL announced that it hopes to release 80 percent of all new IDPs displaced from the Vanni before the end of 2009.)

The Economic Impact of Isolation

¶6. (U) With A-9 Highway heavily mined and still closed, Jaffna is isolated by land from the rest of the island. Goods must be brought in by sea or air, meaning that prices

for many items are three times higher than in the rest of the country. Food is available, but at a price that is beyond the reach of many. A cyclone in late November destroyed much of the local production, including rice. In addition, productive lands in the HSZs are off-bounds. Security forces have recently allowed fishing, a mainstay of the economy, to resume, but night fishing and the use of motor boats are still not permitted. The lack of refrigerated transport means that fish generally cannot be sold to the Colombo market. 50 percent of the population of the Jaffna Peninsula receives World Food Program rations. According to Schuette, most of Jaffna's 500,000 residents can get by only with remittances sent by family members working overseas.

Human Rights Violations Down,
But Jaffna Remains an "Open Prison"

¶7. (SBU) Abductions and extrajudicial killings in Jaffna are down from the high levels that prevailed in 2006-2007. According to statistics provided by Jaffna-based Tamil daily Uthayan, from April through December 2006 in Jaffna District there were 253 extrajudicial killings; in calendar year 2007 the number was 154. In 2008, the number of extrajudicial killings fell to 44. Disappearances followed a similar trend, with 584 in 2006, 281 in 2007, and 41 in 2008. UNHCR attributed the improvement to the fact that with the LTTE largely defeated in Jaffna by 2008, fewer killings and abductions were committed by the anti-LTTE paramilitary Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP) and by the LTTE itself.

¶8. (C) The Bishop of Jaffna attributed many of the killings and disappearances to the military and police. He agreed that shootings and abductions have fallen off, but stressed

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that restrictions on movement remain a serious problem. With the peninsula still under tight military control, a 9:00 pm to 4:00 am daily curfew in effect, land access to the rest of the country closed, and permission to leave by air or boat requiring lengthy clearance from the Army, he said the appearance of the return of relative normalcy to Jaffna is "an illusion," and characterized Jaffna as an "open prison." Civil liberties, he said, continue to be impacted, freedom of expression is largely non-existent, and a climate of fear prevails.

Bishop Welcomes Embassy Efforts
to Stop Anti-Conversion Bill

¶9. (SBU) DCM thanked the Bishop for his public support of the February 3 Co-Chairs statement calling on the LTTE to lay down arms and allow civilians freedom of movement. He remarked that his public criticism of the LTTE for using civilians as human shields had angered many. DCM noted that the Embassy has been very engaged in trying to prevent anti-religious conversion legislation from being brought to a vote in Parliament. The Bishop welcomed those efforts, but stopped short, when asked, of agreeing to join an interfaith effort against the bill.

Tamil Journalists, Students Live in Fear

¶10. (SBU) Since a 2006 attack on the premises of Tamil daily Uthayan, in which two employees were murdered, the paper's editor and chief reporter told DCM and RSO they have lived at the newspaper, rather than their homes, for fear of being assaulted. They blamed the attack on the EPDP. Government restrictions on the paper's access to newsprint, an issue that the Embassy has weighed in with the government on several occasions, remains a problem. The paper recently

received a new shipment of newsprint, but only after a two month delay and having to resort to ordering it in the name of another company.

¶11. (C) Three professors from Jaffna University claimed that students are fearful of the Army, which keeps a close watch on students and faculty suspected of having ties to the LTTE. They noted that the EPDP does not actively intimidate students. The student body of Jaffna University is now 100 percent Tamil. When the A-9 Highway was closed in 2006, the parents of Sinhalese students pulled their children out the university, fearing for their safety. 15 percent of the Tamil students come from outside the Jaffna Peninsula. The professors voiced concern that IDP camps in Jaffna and elsewhere in the country would be used for the long-term internment of Tamils and worried that international humanitarian assistance provided for the camps could have the effect of perpetuating their confinement.

USAID Support for Emergency Medical Response in Jaffna

¶12. (U) While in Jaffna, DCM participated with local government officials in the launch of an emergency ambulance service and communications center, for which USAID has provided a \$200,000 grant through the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance. Through the initiative, 100 people will be trained as emergency medical technicians and 650 doctors and nurses will receive training in advanced cardiac and trauma care. 12,500 community members will receive instruction in basic first aid, and 33 ambulances will be upgraded to meet World Health Organization standards. DCM and RSO also visited the rural Chavakcheri District Hospital, near Elephant Pass, which has received emergency response equipment from U.S. NGO Medical Teams International (MTI), and in Uduvil observed 100 long-term IDPs receiving emergency

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first aid instruction, also through the MTI initiative.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) A very heavy military presence remains in place throughout the Jaffna Peninsula, which is the political and cultural heartland of Sri Lanka's Tamil population. While the LTTE is now militarily defeated on the peninsula, the government can nevertheless be expected to move slowly and cautiously in easing restrictions on freedom of movement. The reopening of the A-9 Highway, expected to take place this year, restoring a land link to the rest of the island should lead to a gradual lessening of Jaffna's economic isolation. Post will continue to urge the government to facilitate the rapid resettlement of Jaffna's newly displaced population and restore basic liberties throughout the peninsula.
Moore